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# Experiencing Fate; or, The Rope: Weaving Will and Destiny in Moby-Dick

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Experiencing Fate; or, The Rope:  
Weaving Will and Destiny in *Moby-Dick*

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*Abstract:*

I focus on one aspect of Melville's struggle to understand human experience and man's relationship to other men and to God. Using close reading to analyze how rope and weaving metaphors in the text explore and explain the problematic concepts of Free Will and Determinism, I show Melville's varied attempts at reconciling the disparate elements of his complex and contradictory beliefs. A comparative close reading of two chapters presents explicitly metaphoric events that use rope and weaving to elucidate a tertiary system of determining fate comprised of free will, chance, and necessity, with a strong emphasis on the interconnectivity of men. Examining specific characterizations of rope, particularly the monkey-rope and the whale-line, I establish the rope as a symbol of reciprocal influence and dependence. An exploration of various iterations of weaving metaphors shows how Melville employs the materiality of rope, a unified whole comprised of many discrete yet interconnected elements, to communicate the complexity of his idea of how fate is determined. I analyze the process of weaving showing the participation of mortals and the divine in the production of fate. I address the text's characterization of free will and predestination showing a theme of loss of individuality over the course of the narrative that undermines individual agency, and moments of action and process in the narrative that disallow absolute predestination. Analyses of divine and non-divine language in the larger text and in specific moments related to determining fate raise the question of God's role in man's destiny. A look at the complex temporality of the narrative problematizes the mysticism of prophecy and foreknowledge in the text, undermining the deterministic ideology espoused by the narrator. In this thesis I do not attempt to arrive at a conclusive interpretation of fate, but rather I seek to demonstrate that Melville remained uncertain about the true nature of human experience through the end of his text.

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## Chapter I. In the Beginning

In the first chapter, “Loomings,” Ishmael introduces the theme of Free Will vs. Determinism. In characterizing the narrative to follow, he not only invokes the predestinating “invisible police officer of the Fates” (1:21)<sup>1</sup> which supposedly drives him to his destiny, but he uses the metaphor of a scripted play to demonstrate his belief in an externally predetermined mode of destination: “Doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago” (1:22). These are no uncertain terms. He even accounts for his own sense of agency that will unfold in the story as “the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment” (1:22). In the first chapter of the text, Ishmael seems certain that his story and his life were written by divine hands.

And yet the text controverts Ishmael’s purported beliefs, and instead of showing the work of “those stage managers, the Fates” (1:22), his narrative actually develops and explores an alternative system of destination that does not conform to either side of the traditional Free Will/Determinism binary. Through complexly interconnected threads of imagery the narrative postulates that fate is produced by collective influence, and neither relies upon nor excludes divine providence or individual free will. The complexity of metaphors that comprise this system are unified by a central motif: the multifarious, woven image of the rope.

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<sup>1</sup> I am using Robert Zoellner’s method of quoting *Moby-Dick* that cites first the chapter followed by the page number. 1:21 signifies chapter 1, page 21 of the Norton Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick*. Not only does it reflect the biblical allusion in Melville’s text, but it locates the images in the linear development of the narrative. This is important because my reading moves back and forth in the text, potentially disrupting the natural progress of the story.

Images of rope and line pervade the text in their most practical and literal usage, as rigging and whale-line and various other trappings of life at sea; and often in these moments of practical application, the rope is associated with the concepts of Free Will and Determinism. However, perhaps even more important than this correlative trend, is the metaphoric potential inherent to the rope's very form. The method that Melville uses to describe his complex system of determination mimics the material composition of the rope by weaving many strands of metaphor together to produce a unified whole.

The use of these individual metaphors in the process of weaving a larger image is exploratory. Melville is conducting numerous individual experiments, with each image and each metaphor testing a different part of his theory of experience. Some metaphors question the role of divinity in Determinism, others explore the intricate causality of mutual influence, and others try to pinpoint the precise meaning of terms and concepts in the context of Free Will and Determinism. Each strand of metaphor is one component of Melville's struggle with the mystery of how humans' fates are decided.

Despite Melville's attempt to unify the disparate elements in his experiences and beliefs by way of the dynamic exploration evident in the text, it appears that he was unable to reach a definitive conclusion. The narrative demonstrates a system that does not coincide with the deterministic ideology expressed by the narrator, establishing a pattern of contradiction that is reiterated throughout the text. Melville struggles with what he believes; alternately presenting ideas of predestination, total Free Will, and the alternative system that challenges the dichotomy between those distinct concepts.

## *Chapter II. Coming to Terms*

Unfortunately, because the terms that relate to Free Will and Determinism are generally vague, it can be extremely confusing to talk about the complex relationship between different aspects of the system, especially outside of the context of a modern philosophical understanding. For the purposes of my essay, small-f fate and small-d destiny will be used interchangeably to refer to the ultimate outcome of an individual's (or group of individuals') life/lives. This is distinct from Fate or Destiny, which I use on many occasions to refer to an external, supernatural force that may determine or influence the ultimate fate of a person or people. Furthermore, in this essay, the word determination is used to describe the manner of determining the fate of an individual, and does not refer to a person's will or resolve.

## *Chapter III. Building a Foundation*

Harrison Hayford, in "Loomings: Yarns and Figures in the Fabric," argues that the analogies presented by Ishmael in the first chapter of *Moby-Dick* tell us how to interpret the full meaning of the rest of the text. For example, the analogy of Narcissus in chapter one is compared to the quest of Ahab. Narcissus falls into the water and drowns in pursuit of the "ungraspable" mystery of life, and Ahab and his crew go to sea in pursuit of the same mystery in the form of the white whale, and also drown. The analogy derives added significance from the fact that Melville changes the story of Narcissus to better fit the fate of his characters. I take a similar approach in my reading of Free Will and Determinism in the text. In the chapters "The Mat-Maker" and "The Monkey-rope" I see the foundation for reading Melville's complex system of human determination that is developed over the course of the novel.

Despite touching on very different aspects of whaling, and using different stylistic modes, both chapters abandon all subtlety of allusion and explicitly state the metaphoric function of their content. In "The Mat-Maker," as Ishmael and Queequeg weave their sword mat, Ishmael says, "It seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates" (47:179). Likewise, in "The Monkey-rope," as Ishmael struggles with the perilous line connecting himself and Queequeg during a dangerous task, he has a realization: "so strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two" (72:255). These overt moments of thinking through metaphor problematize the traditional binary of Free Will and Determinism.

Both chapters employ the same mechanism of metaphORIZING a moment of action and analyzing it as a microcosm of human experience. In "The Mat-Maker," Ishmael and Queequeg are involved in the process of weaving a mat out of rope, with Queequeg using a wooden sword as a beater, and Ishmael working the shuttle and weaving the weft threads. As they work, Ishmael is struck with an inspired insight into the complex workings of determination. He metaphORIZES the literal, physical circumstances of the weaving process, using his immediate practical experience as the foundation for his metaphysical contemplation. Looking at each of the distinct elements of the mat-weaving, he equates them to different aspects of a system of determination.

There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these



unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—nowise incompatible—all interweavingly working together. (47:179)

Through this comparison to a process, we are able to understand the complexity of an interactive system instead of attempting to interpret a less dynamic, two-dimensional image. It also grounds the metaphor in a moment of concrete reality, allowing Ishmael to explicitly state the intended meaning of his metaphor as he also does in “The Monkey-rope.”

The monkey-rope binds together Ishmael and Queequeg during “the tumultuous business of cutting in” (72:254), that is stripping the blubber from the carcass of the whale while it rocks and rolls in the sea alongside the boat. Queequeg’s role in this task is to stand on the slippery corpse and insert the blubber-hook into “the original hole there cut by the spades of the mates” (72:255), staying atop the whale in the sea for the greater part of the treacherous affair. Ishmael’s role is “to attend upon him while taking that hard-scrabble scramble upon the dead whale's back” (72:255). By “attend upon him,” Ishmael means keep him safe by means of a rope-line attached to each man at the waist. This line is the eponymous subject of the chapter and the material foundation of Ishmael’s metaphoric exploration of Free Will. In his description, Ishmael contemplates how the two men are connected more than just physically by the rope.

It must be said that the monkey-rope was fast at both ends ... So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two; that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. ... And yet still further pondering ... I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. (72:255)

Ishmael understands the literal events depicted in this chapter metaphorically, seeing in the physical and immediate circumstances, an analogy for wider human experience. He perceives that by being tied to Queequeg, he is subject to his friend's fate, and not the sole arbiter of his own destiny. The metaphorization of a literal event in this chapter is even more overt than in "The Mat-Maker," as Ishmael pushes beyond the context of his own experience to look at how the interrelationships of all men limit their individual agency.

In these metaphors we can see the intertwining of local and universal elements. The immediate event is a microcosm of the greater human experience in the same way that the rope image is a microcosm of the larger motif of weaving in the text. Melville's metaphoric realizations produce a kind of metonymy that is more concrete than an ungrounded metaphor. In these chapters, and throughout the text, the metaphysical concept is experienced literally and

physically on a micro level, which allows for an intimate, bodily understanding of the represented universal counterpart.



When Ishmael explains the misleading simplicity of the fast-fish law of possession in the whale fishery, he also perfectly describes the problem of traditional Free Will and Determinism. “But what plays the mischief with this masterly code is the admirable brevity of it, which necessitates a vast volume of commentaries to expound it” (89:308). Because the binary is presented so simply, it requires “a vast volume” of interpretation, which allows for discrepancy and contradiction within the binary system.

Both of Ishmael’s unequivocally stated metaphors defy a simplistic explanation of how fate is determined. In “The Mat-Maker,” Ishmael envisions a tertiary instead of binary system comprised of “chance, free will, and necessity” (47:179). In Ishmael’s system, these elements are not opposed to each other like Free Will and Determinism, but rather they are “nowise incompatible – all interweavingly working together” (47:179). Though these concepts are still general, the fate they produce is more complex than the traditional binary approach. The formulation of this complex system of fate establishes the theme of collective determination that is central to Melville’s discussion of Determinism throughout the narrative.

“The Monkey-rope” clarifies “The Mat-Maker,” interpreting Free Will as the extent to which a man’s own actions determine his fate, and showing Chance to be the influence of others’ wills on an individual’s life. The monkey-rope, more than bodily tying Ishmael to his friend, inspires him to reflect on the metaphysical and physical interconnections between men. Ishmael perceives “that [his] free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent [him] into unmerited disaster and death” (72:225). In saying

that his free will is diminished by his connection to Queequeg, Ishmael shows the reader that his understanding of Free Will specifically means an individual's ability to control his own fate. Ishmael refines the broad concept of Free Will to one concise and very specific point, removing ambiguity of interpretation.

Defining Free Will in this way is important because Chance can then be read as all of those things that are not predestinated but are outside of Ishmael's own control. In "The Mat-Maker," when Queequeg actively swings the sword of Chance producing "the final aspect of the completed fabric" (46:179), he acts as a symbol of this external human influence. These readings of Free Will and Chance question to what degree Ishmael, or any man, has the ability to determine his own fate.

The "any man" aspect of Ishmael's contemplation plays an important role in his understanding of destiny because on the *Pequod*, "the monkey-rope [is] fast at both ends" (72:255). The relationship of causality signified by the rope is mutual. Not only must Ishmael share in Queequeg's fate, but Queequeg's fate also depends upon Ishmael. It is not Ishmael's individual agency that determines his destiny, but rather the complex balance of his relationship with another person. Ishmael first realizes this in the microcosmic context of his immediate connection to Queequeg, but then turns his speculation beyond himself to bear on the human condition.

Because Ishmael equates having control over his own fate to having Free Will, he understands sharing the determination of his fate with others as an undermining of his agency. However, what Ishmael perceives as a loss of Free Will, is actually his fate undergoing a redistribution of influence. He is just as in control of his actions and choices as he was before tying on to his friend. What has changed is his belief in his ability to fully control the outcome of

his actions. “Nor could I possibly forget that, do what I would, I only had the management of one end of [the rope]” (72:256). The fact that he controls an end of the rope signifies that he retains his free will and his agency; however, he realizes that the influence of his own will is not absolute. Ishmael was never in complete control of his destiny, but it is only in this moment that he is confronted with the limits of his agency.

Chance is the mutually influential aspect of communal relations. In life, men are all individuals weaving their own woof while playing the role of Chance in the lives of other men. Chance, then, can be viewed as the interaction of a multitude of free wills. This would mean, according to “The Mat-Maker,” that other men have the final say in the outcome of events.

Ishmael further develops his explanation of Chance through the shark metaphor in “The Monkey-rope.” The chance affected by other men's wills is complicated by the chance that originates in their relative ability or inability to execute their intentions. While Queequeg flounders on the whale during the process of cutting in, he is also at risk from the frenzy of sharks that are drawn to the bloody affair. His fellow harpooners, Tashtego and Daggoo, attempt to defend him from aboard the ship with their lances. Ishmael emphasizes the peril inherent in their involvement, saying, “in their hasty zeal to befriend [Queequeg] and from the circumstance that both he and the sharks were at times half hidden by the blood-mudded water, those indiscreet spades of theirs would come nearer amputating a leg than a tail” (72:256). Queequeg's relationship with the “benevolent and disinterested” (72:256) harpooners is the same as Ishmael's relationship with him. Queequeg would not intentionally drown himself, thus hurting Ishmael, but, as the metaphor of the sharks and spades demonstrates, there is a difference between will and execution. Furthermore, through a chain of influence, Ishmael is also dependent upon the two other harpooners. If they were to spear Queequeg, then Ishmael would

surely go under. So we can see Ishmael's meaning in saying that this relationship is shared with a multitude of other men.

#### *Chapter IV. A Closer Look at The Monkey-rope*

When Ishmael realizes that all men share interconnectivity and mutually causality, his revelation retroactively incorporates all of the varied details of the rope connection previously established in "The Monkey-rope." This produces a cohesive and detailed figurative concept centered on the image of the rope. Over the course of the chapter, the connectivity of the rope is characterized as a kind of marriage, and also as bond of brotherhood. Each of these metaphors contains its own particular connotations, and each in turn casts a different light on the relationship of connectivity demonstrated by the rope. Furthermore, these images extend beyond "The Monkey-rope" both drawing from and informing the significance of other chapters. Melville is employing a series of sub-metaphors in his illustration of the larger concept of interconnectivity.

One of the strongest characterizations of the rope is as a bond of matrimony. "For better or for worse," says Ishmael, employing the traditional language of matrimonial vows, "we two, for the time, were wedded" (72:255). This recalls the numerous references to marriage surrounding Ishmael and Queequeg's first meeting and the beginning of their particular friendship. Very early in the novel Queequeg declares that he and Ishmael are "married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be" (10:56). Furthermore, the bed that Ishmael shares with Queequeg at the Spouter Inn is the same one that the landlord and his wife slept in "the night they were spliced" (3:32).

The image of splicing again invokes the rope, showing how connectivity, marriage, and rope are associated throughout the text.

A relationship of marriage necessarily entails both a degree of care and mutuality, two parties depend on each other, and the distinguishing line between their individual fates is blurred. There is also a degree of personal agency and choice intrinsic to the marriage metaphor that emphasizes the continued importance of Ishmael's own free will. When Ishmael describes the possibility of Queequeg's "sink[ing] to rise no more," he says that "both usage and honour demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake" (72:255). This is more involved than the inescapable imperative of being bodily tied together. It is a reminder that Ishmael still has a choice, and that it is his own sense of responsibility that forces him to submit to the fate of his partner. This characterization of the rope demands the reading of a complicated and non-binary understanding of the relationship between Free Will and the external forces that determine a man's fate.

The description of the monkey-rope as an "elongated Siamese ligature" which unites him with Queequeg as an "inseparable twin brother" (72:255) complicates the personal agency implicit in the marriage metaphor. Conjoined twins do not have a choice; they are born with a connection that defines them.

Despite the fact that Ishmael and Queequeg are radically different from each other, they are alike in the fact that their fates are interdependent. When Ishmael pushes the rope metaphor outwards to implicate the situation of "every mortal that breathes" (72:255), this sense of a unified experience goes with it. All men are united by the system of interdependent causality.

In these varied approaches we can see a kind of triangulation. Melville is coming at the complex issue of determination from many different angles in order to eventually pinpoint the

reality at their intersection.

The metaphor of the monkey-rope delineates a complex model of fate in which mutually influential relationships between men produce a kind of communal determination. Everyone's actions determine the degree to which any one person successfully navigates the perils of the world. There is no privacy of action in this idea of fate. The way that one man conducts himself, with or without intention to influence others, still inevitably affects them. Not only does this model of determination suggest a decreased level of personal control, but it also imposes an increased level of culpability onto the human situation.

Ishmael's realizations in "The Mat-Maker" and "The Monkey-rope" (as well as elsewhere in the text) show a production of destiny that is not influenced by a *Deus ex machina* hand of Fate/divine external influence, but rather is created communally. They also show that Ishmael himself is an active participant in the creation of this destiny. Though these chapters build the foundation for the reading of a collectively determined complex system of fate, and show that at least temporarily Ishmael believes in that kind of fate, they do not completely or indefinitely convert his opinion. There are still moments in the text when Ishmael reminds the reader that he believes in predestination. The effect is to produce a narrative where there is no conclusive result to Melville's exploration of Free Will and Determinism except uncertainty.



## Chapter V. A Rope Runs Through It

*“All these particulars are faithfully narrated here, as they will not fail to elucidate several most important, however intricate passages, in scenes hereafter to be painted” (63:235).*

Both “The Mat-Maker” and “The Monkey-rope” examine the rope and employ the technique of metaphor weaving. At the center of each of these microcosmic metaphors is the symbolic image of the rope. The rope threads together what would otherwise be disparate elements such as Cannibals and Christians, or Free Will and Predestination. The role of the rope metaphor in the text is largely one of connectivity, which employs the associations of both the conceptual metaphors inherent in our language, and the practical function of rope. Ropes connect things, tie them together, entangle things. This idea of the line is pervasive as a cultural symbol. Connective imagery extends throughout the text and can be seen prominently in the image of the whale-line, but also in places as subtle as the worsted manropes of Father Mapple’s pulpit ladder in chapter 19 “the Sermon,” which tie the hallowed space of the pulpit to the mundane mortal earth.

Though my analysis has focused on “The Monkey-rope” and “The Mat-Maker,” the most pervasive and meaningful rope image in the text is that of the whale-line. This image is contextualized in many ways, with each moment demonstrating a different metaphoric meaning. Ishmael says it himself at the beginning of the chapter about the line: “With reference to the whaling scene shortly to be described, as well as for the better understanding of all similar scenes elsewhere presented, I have here to speak of the magical, sometimes horrible whale-line” (60:227).

The whale-line, practically, is the rope tied to the end of the harpoon that is darted into the whale. It is by means of the whale-line that the hunters in their boats are able to close the distance between themselves and the fleeing, wounded leviathan and make the final kill. It is also by means of the whale-line that the ship can establish its claim over a wounded or killed whale. The characterizations of the whale-line in the text show rope's potential for multifarious readings, but also establish a trend of signification.

Chapter 89, "Fast Fish and Loose Fish," though not exclusively about the rope, uses the line image to establish ownership through connectivity. Ishmael states the rules of possession in whaling, then develops them with a series of complications and examples, much like what Melville is doing with the question of Free Will and Determinism. Ishmael begins with the fast-fish, saying: "First: What is a Fast-Fish? Alive or dead a fish is technically fast, when it is connected with an occupied ship or boat, by any medium at all controllable by the occupant or occupants,—a mast, an oar, a nine-inch cable, a telegraph wire, or a strand of cobweb, it is all the same" (89:308). The myriad examples of potential connections in this passage get at the symbolic element of the line. Though my analysis explores actual rope as a connector, the image of the line is not restricted to literal rope. This passage also shows the causal role of connectivity. The connection must be "controllable" in order for the fish to be considered fast. That is to say that the fast-fish must be under the influence of the people it is connected to. In "The Monkey-rope," we have a clear demonstration of a similar bodily connection involving influence. When Queequeg is "fast" to Ishmael, he is under Ishmael's influence.

However, the influence of the rope connection goes both ways. Ishmael is also under Queequeg's influence, and the influence of all the things effecting Queequeg's fate. That same mutual causality is presented in "Fast Fish and Loose Fish." The rules of possession in whaling

state, “A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it” (89:308). The language here shows the reciprocal relationship between the two connected elements. Not only is the fish fast to the party, but “the party [is] fast to it.” Through this imagery we can see how the rope demonstrates mutual influence.

While “Fast Fish and Loose Fish” explores the line as a means of connecting the whale to the sailors, in chapter 60, “The Line,” Ishmael examines the relationship between the sailors and the whale-line itself. Not only does he go into great detail examining the physical properties of the line, but he carefully describes the dangers of its use.

Thus the whale-line folds the whole boat in its complicated coils, twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction. All the oarsmen are involved in its perilous contortions; so that to the timid eye of the landsman, they seem as Indian jugglers, with the deadliest snakes sportively festooning their limbs. Nor can any son of mortal woman, for the first time, seat himself amid those hempen intricacies, and while straining his utmost at the oar, bethink him that at any unknown instant the harpoon may be darted, and all these horrible contortions be put in play like ringed lightnings. (60:228-229)

This passage simultaneously shows the danger that the rope poses to the sailors, and also its pervasiveness in their daily experience. On the whaleboat, the rope is quite literally wound all around them. The line as an image of mutually causal relationships is likewise twined into all aspects of an individual’s life.

So the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentines about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play—this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair. But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden

turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. (60:229)

Ishmael pushes the metaphor of the dangerously entangled whale-line outside of the literal moment in the narrative into one of his metaphysical contemplations about the nature of life and the human condition. The text is draped all over with the images of the line, and so the reader is also enveloped like the sailor.

A similar thing happens in “The Monkey-rope.” In both cases the image of the line is characterizing one aspect of determination, external peril being one, and the mutual influence of man, another. Over the course of his narrative, Melville weaves these distinct figures together to communicate his complex idea of fate.

Ahab’s relationship with the line is also crucial to the examination of both the rope motif and the question of Determinism in the text. When Fedallah prophesies the circumstances of Ahab’s death, he says, “Hemp only can kill thee” (117:377). Ahab’s ultimate fate is characterized by the rope. When his doom is finally realized at the end of the narrative, the Parsee’s prediction proves true, and it is by means of the whale-line that Ahab meets his end.

The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the grooves;—ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone. Next instant, the heavy eyesplice in the rope’s final end flew out of the stark-empty tub, knocked down an oarsman, and smiting the sea, disappeared in its depths. (135:426)

In these circumstances we can see the clear connection between predestination and the rope. Ahab seems cursed by Fate, and the mechanism of his fated-ness is the actual whale-line.

“The Town Ho’s Story” is another example of the rope’s close connection to fate. In the

story of mutiny and revenge, a conflict between the *Town Ho*'s mate Radney and one of its sailors, Steelkit, ultimately ends with Radney's death in the jaws of Moby Dick. In the meantime, however, the particulars of the tale are accompanied by conspicuous characterizations of the rope. After Steelkit has rebelled against Radney's unfair commands, he and his compatriots are tied up in the rigging and flogged with a rope whip. The image is repeated when Steelkit, for his revenge against Radney, braids himself a weapon out of twine: "an iron ball, closely netted" (54:211).

Though neither of these images demonstrates predestination, the chapter is full of deterministic language. "Radney was doomed and made mad" (54:202) to provoke Steelkit. He is described as "possessed" by some "cozening fiend" (54:203). This shows Fate instead of agency to be behind his actions. Ishmael even says that "a strange fatality pervades the whole career of these events" (54:212). In the scene of Radney's death, the role of this Deterministic influence is played by Moby Dick, and he is connected to Radney by means of the whale-line.

Despite the fact that both of these instances of rope imagery seem to support a deterministic reading of destiny, they also show the problematic complexity of Melville's understanding of determination. In Ahab's death, though the rope seems to be acting on behalf of Fate, Ahab's agency still plays a crucial role in his own final doom. His disregard for the Parsee's prophecy and continued pursuit of the whale ensure his fate. And, in the actual moment of his death, it is Ahab's active interaction with the line that finally defeats him. In "The Town Ho's Story," though Radney is killed by Moby Dick, Steelkit's control of the whale-line is prominently featured in his death.

Meantime, at the first tap of the boat's bottom, [Steelkit] had slackened the line, so as to drop astern from the whirlpool; calmly looking on, he thought his own thoughts. But a

sudden, terrific, downward jerking of the boat, quickly brought his knife to the line. He cut it; and the whale was free. But, at some distance, Moby Dick rose again, with some tatters of Radney's red woollen shirt, caught in the teeth that had destroyed him. (54:212)

By cutting the line, Steelkit is enacting his own agency and joining his free will with Moby Dick's "inscrutable malice"(36:140) to produce a collective determination of Radney's fate.

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, when the question of Free Will and Determinism is raised, it is often accompanied by a rope or line image. Not only is the rope a symbol of connectivity, and a metaphoric icon of interwoven meaning, but it invokes the question of Free Will and Determinism by means of association. Hayford calls this kind of association an "image motif." He suggests that even if the connection between two figurative elements isn't immediately obvious, if those elements have been intentionally linked elsewhere in the text, then you can, and should, read an association. This thematic linking is what we see in "The Town Ho's Story" between rope and Fate. This is what he calls the "dense imaginative coherence" (Hayford, 668) of *Moby-Dick*. In Hayford's example, he traces recurrent images that are associated with what he calls "the inferior-superior relationship" (Hayford, 661), showing that an image or image motif can be conflated with a thematic binary. Hayford's system of reading metaphors in the text is directly applicable to my reading.

## Chapter VI. Stranded; Weaving Meaning in the Text

Line and rope primarily play a liminal role in the text. As connectors, they are always between two things, transgressing the boundaries between disparate elements and either symbolically or physically uniting them. However, tying things together is not the line's only function. Even the simplest rope is comprised of woven threads. It is this physical woven aspect of rope's construction that has the greatest bearing on Melville's treatment of the complexities of fate. At many points throughout the narrative, Ishmael draws attention to the woven nature of rope, and to the image of weaving in general, deepening the extent to which rope signifies connectivity. As it is comprised of small discrete units interwoven into a greater whole, rope inherently contains potential for great figurative complexity. Its prevalence in the occupation of whaling makes it even more convenient as a vehicle for metaphor in *Moby-Dick*.

This concept underlies my analysis of Free Will and Determinism. Melville is weaving together numerous, discrete metaphors in an attempt to produce a complex and dynamic image of the whole multi-faceted human experience of fate.

The materiality of the rope at the heart of the weaving metaphor is well represented in the text. In chapter 9: "The Sermon," Father Mapple refers to the book of Jonah and its four chapters, "—four yarns —" (9:49), as "one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the scriptures" (9:49). Here, the material composition of rope is utilized in order to demonstrate the hierarchized complexity of biblical teachings. Similarly, Ishmael's classification of the different varieties of whales in "Cetology," is comprised of books and chapters, much like the interwoven scriptures in "The Sermon." In both cases, using the material composition of rope as a metaphor for understanding, Melville is able to explore the detailed characteristics of a single part without

compromising the unity or impact of the woven whole.

On other occasions, different strands of a story represent the different perspectives that comprise one narrative. This happens when the *Pequod* gums with the *Samuel Enderby*, and the ship's surgeon is called on to "spin [his] part of the yarn" (100:338) regarding Captain Boomer's maiming. Another example is the introduction to "The Town Ho's Story," when Ishmael explains to the reader that he is including secret information learned later, along with what he learned at the time of his initial encounter, an act which he describes as "interweaving in its proper place this darker thread with the story" (54:200).

The concept of splicing is another aspect of the rope metaphor that relies on its material composition. To splice is to join two ropes together by interweaving their fibers. Though splicing in itself is quite a literal and practical term, especially aboard a ship, Melville takes advantage of the material implications of splicing in his metaphors for particularly intimate or binding connections. The main subject of this metaphor of connectivity is man. When Queequeg is being questioned about his religion aboard the *Pequod*, Ishmael defends him by saying that all men under God belong to a single church, intrinsic to the human spirit, in which all men "join hands." Captain Peleg corrects him with the rope metaphor. He says, "Splice, thou mean'st *splice* hands" (18:84). This particular image is reiterated when Ahab, rallying the men to his cause against the whale, asks them, "will ye splice hands on it, now?" (36:139). Even earlier in the text, in "The Spouter-Inn," the landlord uses the term spliced to indicate matrimony. Melville's characters are appropriating the terminology of the rope in order to invoke the implications of its material composition, changing the strength of the image of connectivity. Tying, or holding, or even wedding may be temporary, but splicing is permanent. It implies the intermingling of the fundamental elements of two disparate things. Those two things become one.



These rope-weaving images echo Melville's metaphoric approach to establishing his alternative system of determination. The images of the line, which independently characterize various aspects of Free Will and Determinism, are all intertwined to produce the composite whole. Melville weaves the distinct figures together like the strands of a rope in order to develop a fully complex and dynamic idea of fate.

The material composition of the rope is not the only woven element in the text. There is also a strongly characterized motif of weaving that is related to the divine and metaphysical themes of *Moby-Dick*. This can be seen in the "The Mat-Maker," when a simple rope image is employed in the literal process of weaving the sword-mat, and the contemplative process of weaving Ishmael's understanding of fate. The image in "The Mat-Maker" combines the material complexity inherent in woven rope, with the agency of the productive process of weaving. The weaving process is one of the ways that Melville develops his idea of a predestinating God-figure.

In "The Castaway," when Pip's living soul is "carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eye" (93:321), he sees "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" (93:322). In weaving, the treadle determines the rise and fall of the warp threads, and this process determines the ultimate pattern of the fabric. If it is God's foot that works the treadle of the "Loom of Time" (47:179), then this shows how divine influence might fit into Ishmael's understanding of the complex determination of fate.

"A Bower in the Arsacides" again presents the image of a weaver-god in process. On the island of Tranque, in the overgrown arbor of a great sperm whale's skeleton, "the industrious earth beneath was as a weaver's loom, with a gorgeous carpet on it, whereof the ground-vine

tendrils formed the warp and woof, and the living flowers the figures” (102:345). Amid the mystical woods and whalebones Ishmael encounters the same sense of sublimity that overwhelmed Pip in the depths of the sea. In both places, the loom image and metaphor of weaving characterizes this sublimity as the divine process of an active and influential God. Ishmael shows this when he says, “the weaver-god, he weaves” (102:345).

The motif of the rope in *Moby-Dick* builds a framework for understanding connectivity, causality, and fate, through discrete images of the line, but also in terms of the complex materiality of rope and the metaphor of weaving. The interweaving of all of these elements disallow a concrete, black and white reading of the determining force in the novel. Instead, they articulate a more complex dynamic interpretation of the human experience.



Robert Zoellner, in his book *Salt-Sea Mastodon*, says, “The mind imposes meaning ... on everything it encounters” (Zoellner, 43). Though he is talking about Ishmael’s projection of meaning onto his experiences in the narrative, this observation can also be applied to readers of Melville’s text. There is necessarily a degree of interpretation involved in the act of reading, which means that there is inevitably room for misinterpretation. The words and images in a text only account for a single facet of the final message. The rest of the meaning-making process relies upon the reader’s understanding. Melville’s tightly woven metaphors reflect an attempt to more thoroughly illustrate his ideas, and more concretely characterize his own intended meaning. All of his numerous elements, chapters, metaphors, images, etc., combine to produce one full, massive, all-encompassing, deep and detailed understanding of the human experience. The rope, with all of its individual fibers interwoven into a large unified mass of a whole, effectively embodies the complexity of what Melville is trying to accomplish.

## Chapter VII. All is One, and One is All

Through the chapter of “The Monkey-rope,” we have established that Chance can be read as the collective influence of the myriad wills of other men in the local or even global community, and Free Will can be read as the degree to which an individual can control his own fate. The discussion of Free Will must therefore necessarily address the question of individuality in the text.

Over the course of the novel we can see a distinct theme of merging identities and loss of individuality. The crew of the *Pequod*, for example, is largely nameless and faceless in the narrative. Despite being a constant and significant presence in the experiences Ishmael narrates, very few scenes address them as people, referring to them only in terms of the unit they comprise, as “the crew.” This singularity of the *Pequod*’s many sailors is evident in “The Quarter-Deck” when Ahab says, “The crew alone now drink” (36:141). The crew is comprised of many people so it cannot really be alone; yet characterizing it in this way demonstrates that crewmembers are conceived of not as individual people, but as parts of a whole. This loss of individuality is partly due to the practical realities of being a ship’s crew; individuality is necessarily secondary to the functional whole of the community. But it is no accident that this exploration of individuality and Free Will is set aboard a whaling ship.

Even in scenes that do acknowledge that the crew has many members, there is a distinct de-emphasis of individuality. “Midnight, Forecastle” utilizes the style of dramatic literature to present a group dialogue among the crewmembers of the ship. The chapter opens like a play:

## HARPOONEERS AND SAILORS.

*(foresail rises and discovers the watch standing, lounging, leaning and lying in various attitudes, all singing in chorus)*

Farewell and adieu to you , Spanish ladies!

Farewell and adieu to you, ladies of Spain!

Our captain's commanded –

### 1ST NANTUCKET SAILOR.

Oh Boys, don't be sentimental; its bad for the digestion! Take a tonic, follow me!

*(Sings, and all follow)*

(40:145-146)

In this brief introduction we can see how the crewmembers are left conspicuously nameless. The “1<sup>st</sup> Nantucket Sailor” is followed by the “2<sup>nd</sup> Nantucket Sailor,” and then a “Dutch Sailor,” and a “French Sailor.” Over the course of the chapter, five distinct Nantucket sailors are introduced in this impersonal and generalizing manner. The absence of naming formalizes the loss of individuality among the crewmembers. They are all just different types of sailor, as the subtitle of the chapter “Harpooneers and Sailors” suggests. The example of the numbered Nantucket Sailors shows that even though the crewmembers are distinguished by their places of origin, this does not constitute a demonstration of individuality.

The only characters that are named in this chapter are characters that have already been named in previous parts of the text. Pip, Daggoo, and Thashtego all play important roles in the

development of the plot of Ishmael's narrative. This contrast further shows the degree to which the individual members of the *Pequod's* crew fade into the background.

Though naming is one form of individualization, even the named characters in the text are continually beset by occasions of loss of individuality. The monkey-rope metaphor overtly shows the loss of autonomy among main characters when Queequeg is rope-tied to Ishmael. Over the course of the text, Queequeg has been symbolic of agency, and Ishmael has been a representative of individuality through his narrative voice and first-person perspective. In "The Monkey-rope" there is an overt limiting of Queequeg's agency, as he relies upon not only Ishmael, but upon his fellow harpooners to keep him safe while he is below on the whale. Ishmael also keenly feels the limiting of his autonomy and personal agency as he finds his "individuality [...] merged in a joint-stock company of two" (72:255).

In addition to elements of de-individualization accounted for in the narrative, the narration itself demonstrates the larger theme of loss of individuality. The text opens with a strong representation of Ishmael's independent and individual self as a character. He names himself in the opening line of "Loomings" saying, "Call me Ishmael" (1:18), and proceeds to establish his own personal back-story and opinions. And he demonstrates assertiveness in challenging the landlord in "The Spouter Inn." In these early chapters of the book, Ishmael portrays himself as an individual possessing and employing personal agency. As the text moves along, however, moments of Ishmael's character-presence become fewer and fewer until his narrative voice and his character are almost completely invisible. Ishmael is swallowed up by the faceless communality of the voyage, and the text assumes an unaccountable third-person omniscient narrative mode.

“Midnight, Forecastle” is one example of a total absence of Ishmael. Not only is Ishmael not among the sailors of the watch as they share their song and dialogue, but the dramatic form negates the narrative role that he normally plays in the text. This instance is one of many that show the waning of Ishmael’s individuality.

These Ishmael-free chapters are not the only way that Ishmael’s individual character is diminished over the course of the text. We can also see the disappearance of his narrative voice in the private interactions between other characters. For example, in “Ahab and Starbuck in the Cabin,” a confrontation between the two men over a leaking cask of sperm oil causes Ahab to threaten his mate with a loaded musket. When, in the privacy of the Captain’s cabin below decks, “Ahab seized a loaded musket from the rack (forming part of most South-Sea-men’s cabin furniture), and point[ed] it towards Starbuck” (109:362), there is no way that Ishmael could have been there to witness and recount the events. Later in “the Musket,” Starbuck, recalling Ahab’s threat, and the even greater threat that his monomaniacal obsession with Moby Dick poses to the crew of the *Pequod*, considers a deadly one-man mutiny against his captain with the very same gun that Ahab had leveled at him. The narration describes “the isolated subterraneousness of the cabin”(123:386), yet in such isolation, there could be no way for Ishmael to witness the scene. These moments of impossibly omniscient narration undermine the corporeal reality of Ishmael’s individual self, both as a narrator and as a character. The increased frequency of these types of narrative moments towards the end of the text progressively negate Ishmael’s individuality.

Because “The Monkey-rope” has pinned Free Will down as an individual’s ability to control his own fate, the loss of individuality helps establish that Free Will is subordinate to the influence of the group. This is what Ishmael overtly states in “The Monkey-rope” when he philosophizes that his situation “was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in

most cases, he, one way or another, has [that] Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals” (72:255). This is also what he shows in “The Mat-Maker,” when Queequeg, the symbol of Chance and collective human agency, beating down the weft with his wooden sword, has the final say in the outcome of events.

### *Chapter VIII. Modeling Agency*

Though individuality and agency are connected through Ishmael’s understanding of Free Will, they are distinct aspects of Melville’s textual exploration of the question of Free Will and Determinism. While loss of individuality shows a textual bias towards communal determination, active narration and performative subject matter demonstrate the continued influence of individual human agency on the production of man’s ultimate fate.

Active places in the narrative relate largely to the named characters such as Ahab, the mates, the harpooners, and Ishmael. Both “The Mat-Maker” and “The Monkey-rope” exemplify performative moments insofar as they describe characters actively doing something. This is distinct from the larger body of the text where the characters are passive or absent. Moments of character agency, choice, and action demonstrate Free Will. They also show narrative agency in contrast to the expository or philosophical tenor of the rest of the text.

Because Ahab’s monomania is so distinctly developed as one of the central focuses of the story, and because the crew receives so little attention in the narrative, it is an easy thing to forget the role each individual plays in his own determination. Each crewmember has signed on for a whale hunt with Ahab, and they have all (except for Starbuck) enthusiastically agreed to pursue Moby Dick. In “The Quarter Deck,” when Ahab rallies the crew and swears them to his quest, “they [are] all eagerness” (36:138). Though the chapter addresses the power of Ahab’s influence

over the crew, it also unequivocally demonstrates the crew's agency and active participation. It is as Ahab says, "I do not order ye; ye will it" (36:142). Even Ishmael actively elects to engage in this quest. At the beginning of "Moby-Dick," he reminds us that, "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs" (41:152).

Though the theme of diminishing individuality in the text undermines personal agency, particularly among the peripheral characters, these moments reaffirm that agency, showing that, though no character is the sole arbiter of his fate, his free will does play an active part in determining his own destiny.

The whale sighting at the end of "The Mat-Maker" is another symbolic moment showing the otherwise overshadowed agency of the crew. When Tashtego interrupts Ishmael's reverie of contemplative weaving with his sighting of the sperm whale, "[Tashtego's] body was reaching eagerly forward, his hand stretched out like a wand" (47:179-180). His posture shows engagement. The characterization of his hand as a wand suggests performance. It is almost as though he is conjuring the whale as he spies it. In this pseudo-performative whale sighting, we are reminded that engaging in deadly combat with the whale is the product of the sailors' own actions. This works together with the theme of collective determination that was introduced earlier in "The Mat-Maker."

Examples of active participation undermine the idea of absolute predetermination that Ishmael espouses in "Loomings." Though he says that his experience of agency was a delusion under the cunning manipulation of the Fates, his attitude is not supported by the text. At least to some extent, he and his fellow sailors are all influencing their own destinies. This is important because when Ishmael disavows his agency, he is disavowing his own culpability. If an all-powerful external figure has predetermined all events, then individuals cannot be held



accountable for any of their actions. Demonstrations of agency in the text establish responsibility of action, which is an important aspect of Melville's exploration of Free Will and Determinism.

*Chapter IX. Divine, or Not Divine, That is Determinism.*

Melville's exploration of Free Will and Determinism questions the assumed relationship between predestination and the divine. For example, in "The Mat-Maker," which establishes Ishmael's alternative tertiary system of determination, the language employed in the metaphor opens the door for an analysis of non-divine external influence. When Ishmael describes "the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration" (47:179), he interprets them as "necessity" (47:179). From his characterization of these threads, it is clear that they occupy the role of uncompromising determinism. They are "unchanging" like pre-destination, and "ever-returning" like the eternal figure of a providential God. However, Ishmael conspicuously does not say God, or Providence, or Fate. In this line, Ishmael says "necessity." In the context of the larger narrative, which has been in no way lacking in references to these deific powers, the absence of such a reference draws attention to this moment. Melville complicates the question of what determinism is by suggesting that there is a difference between divine influence and mundane influence.

Looking at this moment in conjunction with a later chapter of the text, "The Fountain," supports the reading of necessity as mundane and practical reality. In the chapter on the whale's spout, Ishmael chides the whaler for his pride, saying, "Not so much thy skill, then, O hunter, as the great necessities that strike the victory to thee!" (85:291). These "great necessities" are the whale's physiological need to breathe. The qualities and characteristics of the whale determine

what it needs, necessitate certain actions, which must and will be. These actions are what afford the whaler his chance to hunt the whale. You may say then, that the whale is fated to be hunted, but the mechanism of this fated-ness is rooted in practical and natural reality instead of in the lofty heavens.

Looking at the very final moment of the text, after the *Pequod* has been stove and sunk by Moby Dick, “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (135:427), showing the eternal constancy of nature that continues in its interminable pattern, unaffected by the lives and fates of the drowned crew. The sublime, ineffable immortality of the sea, which outlasts all things, is like the warp threads in “The Mat-Maker” that are only minutely influenced by the laborious weaving of countless individuals. Though still imbued with a sense of sublimity, this is a mundane reading of the necessity described in “The Mat-Maker,” in which case that chapter’s woven system of determination can exist entirely outside of the influence of God or the Divine.

When, in “The Monkey-rope,” Ishmael is reflecting on the serious danger of Queequeg’s situation, he guesses that, “poor Queequeg, [...] only prayed to his Yojo, and gave up his life into the hands of his gods” (72:256). The tone of this comment is mocking, as though Ishmael is pointing out how silly it is for Queequeg to be praying to his gods for salvation when truly, his life is in Ishmael’s hands. This directly characterizes Ishmael’s conflicted attitude towards divinely determined pre-destination. It raises the question of divine impotence vs. divine indifference. This ties in to Ishmael’s own sentiment in the same chapter, when he claims “a sort of interregnum in Providence” (72:255), saying that Providence must be absent because, “its even-handed equity never could have so gross an injustice” (72:255). These examples show both

doubt in the destinating role of the divine, and belief in its existence and influence.

The profuse religious imagery in *Moby-Dick* spiritualizes the text, framing the question of Free Will or Determinism in Melville's relationship with God. Potentially taking God out of the picture recontextualizes Melville's exploration. More than just trying to understand man's relationship with God, he is trying to understand the nature of human experience and destination. While Melville's use of the word necessity instead of Providence opens the door for a godless reading of fate, it does not preclude the possibility of God. In the metaphor that Melville is building, there is room for divine influence to coexist with man's will and the forces of Chance and nature. The potential for multiple readings of determination is one of many signs of Melville's ideological uncertainty. He is not confident in his beliefs, so his system must be able to fit with both frames of ideology.

## Chapter X. Back From the Future

Prophecy is predictive instead of certain. Foreknowledge on the other hand is absolute. This is an important distinction to make when reading *Moby-Dick* because the two are strongly conflated in the text through the unique temporality of its narrative form.

Foreknowledge is an important part of the question of Determinism because if foreknowledge exists, it implies predestination. Whether or not predestination requires Determinism is up in the air, and is one of the elements that Melville is exploring. The strong theme of prophecy and predictive imagery in the text, if not unpacked, can necessitate a deterministic reading of events. The temporality of the text allows us to untangle the confusion between prophecy, foreknowledge, and Determinism.

By temporality I mean the complicated and multivalent time in which the text takes place. Ishmael is approaching the narrative from the future. That is to say that the events being described have already happened when he begins telling his story. Ishmael's perspective is one of recollection. From that point of view, his knowledge of his own past functions as foreknowledge in his narrative, and he is able to project a sense of pre-determination onto the story. When he writes that his whaling voyage on the *Pequod* was predestined, and that the end was determined long ago, it is practically true. At the time of his writing, events *have* been determined insofar as they reached their conclusion before the commencement of Ishmael's narration. As a narrator from the future of his own story, he is able to read premonitions and signs in all things that might point towards the tale's already determined conclusion.

In the same moment that Ishmael introduces Pip, he also refers to his eventual doom. "Black Little Pip [...] went before. Poor Alabama boy! On the grim *Pequod's* forecastle, ye shall

ere long see him, beating his tambourine; prelusive of the eternal time, when sent for, to the great quarter-deck on high, he was bid strike in with angels, and beat his tambourine in glory” (27:107). This seems prophetic, but in the context of Ishmael’s narrative foreknowledge, it is simply an atemporal reference to events.

At the end of “The Castaway,” Ishmael also “foresees” the fatal conclusion of the text. When Pip survives being temporarily lost at sea, his soul drowns, and in this drowning, Ishmael sees the watery fates of the *Pequod’s* crew. According to Ishmael, Pip’s misfortune “ended in providing the sometimes madly merry and predestinated craft with a living and ever accompanying prophecy of whatever shattered sequel might prove her own” (93:319). Ishmael projects Determinism onto the circumstance by using the terms “predestinated” and “prophecy.” However, this prophetic language can be attributed to the fact that Ishmael has already witnessed the final event. Something that he reminds us in the same chapter when he says, “in the sequel of the narrative, it will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself” (93:322).

Ishmael’s repeated emphasis of his role as a narrator also supports a mundane reading of prophecy. One such moment occurs at the end of “The Crotch,” when Ishmael contextualizes his explanation of the harpooning system on the whaleboat in terms of future events. “All these particulars are faithfully narrated here, as they will not fail to elucidate several most important, however intricate passages, in scenes hereafter to be painted” (63:235). This passage debunks the prophetic inclination of the text by reminding the reader that Ishmael already knows the outcome of events. There is nothing mystical or supernatural in this moment of Ishmael’s foreknowledge.

“The Town Ho’s Story” is another example of Ishmael’s conspicuous interruption of his own narrative. At the beginning of the chapter he explains that he learned what had happened on the *Town Ho* from Tashtego long after meeting with that ship. In addition, Ishmael overtly states

his resolve to “preserve the style in which I once narrated [the story] at Lima to a lounging circle of my Spanish friends, one saint’s eve” (54:200), years after the voyage of the *Pequod*, but before the time of his narration. The chapter is taking place in three distinct time settings simultaneously. Ishmael maintains his stylized retrospective narrative for the whole chapter, enforcing the conspicuousness of his role as a narrator. The simultaneity of time in these moments reminds us that Ishmael is narrating from the point of view of the story’s future, which necessarily changes the significance of the prophetic elements of the story about Radney and Steelkit. When Ishmael says that “Radney was doomed and made mad” (54:202), it is because he already knows that Radney will be killed by Moby Dick. “The cozening fiend... that possessed Radney to meddle” (54:203), can be seen as a projection of prophecy from Ishmael’s semi-omniscient narrator self.

The temporality of Ishmael’s narrative role demonstrates both how foreknowledge and prophecy are conflated in the text, and how they problematize the question of Determinism. Prophecy does not have to signify divine presence or predestination; however, a mystical reading of foreknowledge and predestination is still possible. Characters like Elijah from “The Prophet” suggest, if not predetermination, then at least a degree of inescapable Fated-ness. Even though we can account for Ishmael’s moments of prophetic vision, it is harder to de-mystify Elijah and the Parsee.

The same retrospective narration of *Moby-Dick* that complicates the theme of prophecy also produces a cyclical effect in the text. Like in the chapters that emphasize Ishmael’s role as narrator, “Epilogue” reminds the reader that in the sequence of Ishmael’s story telling, the end of the events is actually followed by the beginning of the narrative. The cyclical nature of the text reinforces inconclusiveness by reintroducing Ishmael’s initial deterministic ideology from

“Loomings.” This returns the reader to the undeveloped initial presentation of free will that subsequently and necessarily upsets the new system that has been built over the course of the narrative. This creates a loop of fluctuating attitude towards Determinism. Though Ishmael believes that his actions are predestinated, his narrative contradicts that belief by establishing a complex system of mutually determined fate. This shows that despite using the text of *Moby-Dick* to explore and probe the mysteries of fate in the context of the human experience, Melville himself was unable to settle upon a conclusive belief that could stand up to his close and critical scrutiny. His uncertainty, which remains at the end of the narrative, is also present throughout in the oscillating and contradictory expression of Free Will and Determinism.

#### *Chapter XI. In In-Conclusion*

I call *Moby-Dick* an exploration, because in it Melville is trying to reconcile apparently contradictory elements of his beliefs. In attempting to unpack the multitudinous intricacies of Free Will and Determinism, he is searching for an answer to explain his experience of reality. As readers we are persuaded by his quest for truth, and so burdened with a part of his struggle. Unfortunately, Melville did not find his truth in writing *Moby-Dick*, and so it is impossible to find it there.

It is tempting to try and read a conclusion out of the narrative, latching onto one reading or another regarding Free Will and Predetermination, and resisting the inconsistency of belief in the narrative voice. However, it is as Ishmael says in “The Fountain”: “In this world it is not so easy to settle these plain things. I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all. And as for this whale spout, you might almost stand in it, and yet be undecided as to what it is precisely” (85:292).

Melville was unable to come up with an answer; therefore, trying to pull one out of the text or force one onto it is necessarily problematic. In addition to all of the specific readings of Melville's myriad rope and weaving metaphors, and his attempts to establish a unifying system of Free Will and Predestination, I hope to have shown the fluctuations in his attitude towards his struggle for truth. At the end of his journey as an author, and of our journey as readers, Melville doesn't know what he believes, and so this exploration must conclude with inconclusion.

*"Finally: It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once, perfected.*

*You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught."*

(32:124-125)



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